

## Wandering through the humour of a ghost poem

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## Wandering Through the Humour of a Ghost Poem: On the Reading Process of Humour in May Kendall's 'The Conscientious Ghost' (1887)

### Introduction

This article has two goals. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the research on the works of Victorian author May Kendall (1861-1943). In his article on 'The Lay of the Trilobite', John Holmes notes that there exist only few critical discussions of Kendall's most famous poem. As a possible explanation, he points towards the idea that 'what it says appears on the face of it straightforward' (Holmes 2010:1). This apparent straightforwardness is arguably present in all of Kendall's humorous poems. My article demonstrates, however, that there is a complexity and a subtlety to the humour in her poetry that can be analysed using insights from the interdisciplinary field of humour studies. Concretely, it examines the process by which readers can interpret the humour in May Kendall's poem 'The Conscientious Ghost' (1887)<sup>1</sup>, while reading the text as one would 'typically' read a poem.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the article understands the search for multiple and complex meanings (heightened semantization (Wolf 2005: 24-30)) by associating elements and structures throughout the text as typical of the poetic reading process. Secondly, the article hopes to

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<sup>1</sup> See annex.

further the research on the applicability of models for verbal humour to poetry. It claims that the incongruity-based models for verbal humour, the type of model most often used for the analysis of textual humour, suggest a simple, predominantly linear, quick way of reading. I argue that such a reading process is inconsistent with the way poetry is typically read and incompatible with the experience of the complex literary qualities of humour that literary scholars have noted in poems such as Kendall's science poems. I therefore propose to model the reading process as one that entails a more literary way of reading, consisting of three 'flows' of reading: a decoding, a poetic, and a meta-reflective flow.

In what follows, I develop the model for this reading process consisting of three flows and illustrate how the model can be applied through an analysis of 'The Conscientious Ghost'. Firstly, I briefly present the state of the critical field on Kendall's poetry. Next, I introduce the idea that it is useful to model the reading process of poetic humour as consisting of three flows. Finally, I model each of these three flows and demonstrate how they create meaning in a reading of Kendall's poem.

### May Kendall

May Kendall, born Emma Goldworth Kendall in 1861, is an English poet, novelist and essayist of the late Victorian era. In 1885 she published a satirical story that includes passages in verse, entitled *That Very Mab*, with the Scottish poet, anthropologist, historian

and Hellenist Andrew Lang. She subsequently published two volumes of poetry which contained both new work and poems previously published in magazines. *Dreams to Sell* (1887) features poems which had previously appeared in the comedy magazine *Punch* and the literary magazine *Longman's*. It moreover contains 'The Conscientious Ghost', which was also published in *Longman's* the same year and would later appear in several British magazines, before going viral in American newspapers. *Songs from Dreamland* (1893) sets itself apart from *Dreams to Sell* with its 'whimsical subheadings' (e.g., 'Fantasies', 'On the Windy Side of Care') instead of straightforward topics (e.g., 'Science' and 'Art' (Blain 2014: 309)). The fact that Kendall did not publish any more poetry collections may be because, around the turn of the century, her activity shifted towards sociology and non-fiction writing (Birch 2011: 56). In addition to poetry, Kendall wrote three novels and collaborated with the philanthropist Seebohm Rowntree on his studies *How the Labourer Lives* (1913) and *The Human Needs of Labour* (1918), which she sculpted into a narrative form (Blain 2014: 308-309). Today Kendall is especially known for her comic poetry (Maltz 2007: 313). While my reading of Kendall's poem will not be a mainly contextual interpretation but rather one focussing on the humour in the text, I will have to connect the poem to the Victorian context and to Kendall's sympathy for the labourer in order to understand the ideas that are expressed through its humour.

Existing studies on Kendall's humorous poetry often interpret the texts within their historical context. That context is characterized by scientific innovations (e.g., the

rise of Darwinism and the idea of higher dimensions in non-Euclidean geometry (Funk 2015)), and the associated changes in worldview, view of man and view of society (Holmes 2010). Several studies analyse how Kendall's satirical poems express personal views on science and religion (Holmes 2010), on social inequality (Maltz 2007; Tate 2020) and gender, and how her poems about gender connect with a wider discourse linking Darwinism to gender relations (Randolphe 2001; Moine 2010; Birch 2011 & 2019a). Finally, it has been analysed how Kendall's poems enter into dialogue with the dominant male tradition of Victorian poetry (Birch 2019b; Casanova 2019). Existing research thus analyses the serious messages and contexts of her satire. Virginia Blain (2014: 309) furthermore discusses some of the comedic devices in Kendall's work, such as 'clever twists of the language', and strategies such as the 'deadpan absurdist mode', and satirical use of scientific jargon that generates humour. In addition, Gillian Beer (2000) discusses Kendall's poems on science and *That Very Mab* in her article 'Rhyming as Resurrection' (2000), by focussing on the significances of rhyme in Victorian literature. According to Beer, Kendall's works uses rhyme as a way of 'resurrecting' and transforming a previous sound or word, so that the rhyme evokes the eternity and ever-transforming nature of waves in the new view of the cosmos. Rhyme is also used to 'trivialise'. As such, it would often express an ironic vision on science and its cultural dominance (Beer 2000: 196-200). In 'The Conscientious Ghost' specifically, rhyme would function as a technique to 'license' 'denied elements of experience' such as ghosts

(Beer 2000: 196). That being said, there exists no in-depth analysis of the ways in which a poem by Kendall creates an experience of humour and how the instances of humour influence the meaning of the poem.

A possible cause for the lack of a systematic analysis of the humour itself may be that, as Alleen and Don Nilsen (2008: 261) claim, literary scholars used to be prejudiced against the study of it. The situation only improved once interest in the formal study of humour arose. If humour in and of itself is not seen as a serious topic for literary research, it makes sense for scholars to mainly study how comic elements reflect serious philosophical attitudes or express serious ideas about society. Another, related cause may lie in the absence of a generally accepted methodological framework for the systematic analysis of humour in poetry. Arguably, the models for verbal humour from the fields of linguistics and contemporary humour studies offer a framework that can serve as a starting point for such a methodology. In what follows, I will show that a method for readings of Kendall's humorous poems can be derived from the idea of semantic script oppositions as a central characteristic of humour. That idea was introduced in the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) by Victor Raskin and was integrated in its successor, the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) by Raskin and Salvatore Attardo. These script-based theories however imply a reading process that does not fully correspond with the way in which poetry is normally read. Insights from the models, however, can be combined with ideas from the fields of literary studies and cognitive

poetics in particular to create a model that *can* account for the typical reading process of poetry.

### Scripts and humorous poetry

The idea that Kendall's humour uses 'clever twists of the language' (Blain 2014: 309) and the fact that her satire explores scientific, cultural and social debates – the contrasting ideas of her time – suggest that incongruity-based theories could be specifically suitable for the analysis of her poetry. Such theories are dominant for the study of verbal humour and connect the experience of humour to the bringing together of two or more incompatible ideas (Attardo 1994: 47-48). What is however the nature of these incompatible ideas and how are they brought together? Different incongruity-based theories of humour provide different answers to that question or leave it open.

Most of the currently dominant models for verbal humour, the script-based theories by Attardo and Raskin, Francisco Yus' (2016) relevance theory of humour, and the cognitive linguistic approaches to humour as described by Geert Brône, Kurt Feyaerts and Tony Veale (Brône & Feyaerts 2004; Brône et al. 2006; Brône 2017) all situate the incongruity at a cognitive level, the level on which the mind forms mental representations of situations described by the text. This approach was first introduced in Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour. Its cognitive view on semantics allowed it to describe

semantic incongruities which could not be accounted for using only traditional lexical semantics. For example, it could account for incongruities in meaning based on encyclopaedic knowledge that is not included in dictionary definition of words. For example, based on Western culture and gothic literature, we expect ghosts to roam the night freely, while in 'The Conscientious Ghost', the titular character gets bossed around by the psychical societies. To understand this incongruity, analysts should not only consider the 'dictionary definition' of jokes but a larger, structured chunk of knowledge used to conceptualize 'a ghost', i.e. the 'script'<sup>2</sup> for 'ghost'.

The SSTH's views on semantic incongruity were largely preserved when it was expanded so as to make it account for other characteristics of humorous texts as well, thus

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Raskin somewhat randomly uses 'script' as a general label for structured chunks of semantic knowledge evoked by a word and explicitly refuses to discuss the differences between 'scripts' and similar concepts (e.g. 'frames' and 'schemata'; Raskin 1985: 81). This can make it unclear to analysts between what type of structured chunks of information they are supposed to describe an opposition as to explain the incongruity in a given joke. Since the incongruities in Kendall's poem are rather easily described and because it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a way to remediate that terminological vagueness, I will simply follow Raskin's terminology. Further research may improve my model of the reading process by redefining/replacing the concept 'script', perhaps based on existing proposals such as that of the one by Atilla Nemesi to use 'frame' for 'lexical domains' and 'script' for 'higher order packages of information' (Nemesi 2020: 6)).



becoming the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo & Raskin 1991). The GTVH became a dominant general, yet clearly linguistics-based, model for textual humour and is still relevant in the interdisciplinary field of humour research. As Elliott Oring claims, it 'has dominated the discussion of humour theory for the last quarter of a century (Oring 2019: 151). It generated a great deal of interest in humour studies by scholars both within and outside the discipline of linguistics.'

Still, recent studies on textual humour have formulated noteworthy criticisms of the model's view on humorous incongruity. Firstly, studies have argued for a broader, more prototype-based<sup>3</sup>, dynamic conceptualization of the incongruous cognitive structures, known as 'scripts' in the script-based theories (Coulson et al. 2006: 232; Yus 2016: 84-86; Couder 2019: 136-140). As Attardo (2006: 341-342) has noted, in theory, the GTVH already describes scripts as dynamic, adaptable structures being stored as prototypes. Nevertheless, these properties of scripts are rarely mentioned in practical

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<sup>3</sup> This means: based on the idea that the mind stores knowledge on a 'typical'/'central' member of a category and can recognise other members as being relatively similar to said 'prototype' based on the presence of prototypical traits (e.g., a prototypical ghost is nocturnal, scary, jangles rusty bells, etc.). Kendall's ghost (nocturnal and partaking in ghostly activities) is still recognisable as a ghost, but he is seen as a less typical one, since he isn't scary.

demonstrations of the model. In this article, I will refer to the fact that new scripts can be formed during a reading, however not with regard to the opposing scripts in short jokes as described by the script-based models. To give a concrete example: as far as the processing of the simple jokes in the poem is concerned, I will assume that the script for ‘ghost’ that the reader uses to process the poem corresponds more or less to our standard knowledge about ghosts and was not formed specifically for that situation. My use of the concept ‘script’ should not be interpreted as a rejection of the criticisms and alternative models which suggest that S5TH-GTVH-style scripts are too static as a concept to aptly represent our semantic thinking. Rather, the incompatible scripts in Kendall’s poetry seem to almost coincide with the then prototypical views on the topics addressed (ghosts and labour). The text does not require readers to adapt their prototypical mental representations of ghosts and labour much in order to understand the opposition. Therefore, the relatively static concept of ‘scripts’ works as a starting point for my method of analysis.

Secondly, recent cognitive linguistic approaches to humour tend to connect it to atypical usages of operations by which conceptualizations are constructed<sup>4</sup> (e.g., atypical

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<sup>4</sup>Cognitive linguistics sees the “construction of mental representations of situations, as the essence of linguistic thinking. This construction proceeds through various operations, called “construal operations”, which can be recognized in language.

usages of mapping, blending, metaphor, metonymy, perspective, etc.) (Brône & Feyaerts 2004: 362-364; Brône et al. 2006: 206-207), rather than on the mental representations (stored in scripts) themselves. They are, as Brône and Feyaerts (2005: 363) claim, however 'not necessarily incompatible' with the script-based theories' claims on script opposition. I will connect humour to the processing of incongruous scripts (which, in Kendall's science poetry that opposes views on 'scientific topics', readers may notice more easily than atypical usages of blending or mapping), leaving open the question of whether the initial experience of humour is caused by the processing of the script opposition directly or by the atypical usage of the construal operations used for the processing. In simpler terms: if an operation such as an unusual metaphor involving a ghost and a labourer causes the reader to switch from the script of 'labourer' to that of 'ghost', I will associate the humour with the script opposition, without wondering if the opposition causes the experience of humour directly or whether it is actually the strangeness of the metaphor that does that. This latter distinction matters little to my central point on the three flows of reading. In short, while I use the terminology of the script-based theories and present them as useful models with which to analyse Kendall's poetry succinctly, my theory is equally compatible with more recent cognitive incongruity-based theories.

That being said, there is one aspect of the script-based paradigm that problematizes its use in literary analyses of poetic texts. It was created for humour in

everyday language. In my view, it puts forward a reading process that differs from the specific reading process of humour in literary texts (specifically in poetry). I will illustrate the difference between the two ways of reading by applying them to 'The Conscientious Ghost'. First, I will describe the reading process suggested by the SSTH and GTVH, then I will explain what happens differently with humour in poetry.

#### The reading process in the script-based theories

Both models assume that meanings evoked by words in a text when that text is read are stored in scripts. Scripts are cognitive structures with prototypical knowledge about activities and situations (Yus 2016: 81-84; Couder 2019: 69-75). According to the models, verbal humour occurs because a text evokes two overlapping but opposite scripts (Raskin 1985: 99-100). Oppositions are potentially humorous if they are based on certain more general oppositions, including good-bad, life-death, and normal-abnormal (Raskin 1985: 107-114). I will add young-old since the funniness of elderly people acting like younger people or vice versa could play an important role in the humour of Kendall's poem in which an elderly character has to work like a younger person.

Kendall's poem presents at least three prototypical situations: the apparition of a ghost, the old person who needs to rest, and the duties of the conscientious Victorian worker. At first glance, we may think that these each correspond to a script. However,

two very different views of the first situation — that of the appearing spectre — are proposed. They each evoke a separate mental representation and therefore a separate script. Firstly, there is the traditional view of ghosts as scary but tormented creatures whose presence is ungodly and unnatural. Secondly, there is the ‘psychical’ or parapsychological view of ghosts as analysable phenomena, arising from an invisible, yet to be discovered, part of reality. I will consider the idea of the old person needing to rest as part of the (third) duty-script, since it is only ever presented as an exception to the rule that conscientious workers want to fulfil duties.<sup>5</sup>

Each of the three scripts is in a potentially humorous opposition to the other two. There are contrasts of life-death, normal-abnormal, good-bad, and ageing-not ageing between the ‘duties’ script on the one hand and both ghost scripts on the other. I consider ageing-not ageing as a variant of old-young. The dutiful worker ages to a point where he

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘dynamic’ approach to the definition of scripts defines them as fragments of the ‘semantic network’ (a structure connecting all of a person’s semantic knowledge) activated by the text (Attardo 2001: 6-7). Therefore, the amount of knowledge that belongs to *one* script is defined dynamically, by the way in which the knowledge is used. In this poem, the idea of old people resting is used as knowledge about (the end of) the life of a dutiful worker. Therefore, it makes sense to consider it part of the ‘duties’ script in this particular case.

shouldn't have to work anymore, the ghost doesn't. There exists a 'good versus bad' opposition between the scripts for ghostly apparitions. In the traditional script, the ghost's activity is malicious or dangerous. In the poem, images such as 'blood-stained floors', 'the weary night', 'with rapture grim' and '[b]eneath the dismal sky' evoke the grim atmosphere associated with the traditional ghost script. In contrast, in the parapsychological script, the ghost's activity is a scientifically interesting phenomenon. Thus that script must, for example, be used to understand why the psychical societies of Kendall's time want to inquire about the cause of the ghost's behavior in the verses "They ask me whether I forgot / To wander round the moat; / They wonder what I mean by not / Steering my phantom boat.'

Note that we as readers can recognise these scripts because our culture has led us to acquire prototypical knowledge on ghosts (including ghosts in gothic fiction), science, work, and duty. Naturally, however, our knowledge differs from that of the Victorian audience. We should be critical about the way in which our own cultural-historical context influences our reading. We may not experience certain script oppositions that would have been clear to a Victorian reader. We may also intuitively see oppositions between concepts that would not exist in the Victorian mind. This is simply because our scripts for certain concepts have changed. If an analyst is not aware of this, the methodology that this article introduces can lead to subtly anachronistic readings of

historical poems, in the sense that the analyst would analyse the humour as a contemporary reader experiences it.

In a 'normal' reading process, the script opposition corresponds to a 'disjunction'. This is because, when interpreting text elements, a switch is made from one script to another script. The GTVH does not say which features of humorous texts directly cause the cognitive-emotional experience of humour, but the disjunction seems at least closely related to it. It involves a sudden moment of cognitive effort that can provoke laughter and makes readers realise that the sender of the humorous utterance (the implied reader or the subject/character speaking) is not cooperating in a serious way (as is touched upon in Francisco Yus' relevance theory (see below)).

However, such a disjunction assumes that readers perform a predominantly linear reading, interpret the signs almost immediately, and reject interpretations that entail an inconsistency on the level of the content. By mentioning the 'almost immediate' interpretation, I am not referring to theories on 'comedic timing' but rather to the fact that during this every-day reading process, 'meanings [are] being constructed on the spur of the moment, immediately upon the recipient's encounter of the elements evoking them' as well as to the fact that this process 'recludes delays in interpretation and often relies on cognitive shortcuts in the process of ambiguity resolution' in the sense that '[i]nterpreters resolve ambiguities, not even being aware of alternative meanings' (Dyvel 2009: 17-18). I write 'predominantly linear' since, after the experience of the incongruity,

the reader often re-examines the previous elements of the joke, looking for a new, coherent interpretation (Attardo 1994: 97 & Dynel 2009: 24).<sup>6</sup> In any case, this type of reading clearly differs from the typical poetic reading, in which readers carefully search for meaningful patterns throughout the text and assume that each sign can carry several, sometimes unstable meanings. The interpretation of certain symbolic elements that play a role in the humorous script oppositions in Kendall's poem seems to presuppose that poetic reading, especially because these elements appear in a text which looks like a poem. Think of the metaphorical connection between the Victorian workload and the fate of a haunted ghost or the symbols of death and impermanence that are part of the traditional 'ghost' script.

A similar issue would occur if we were to apply Francisco Yus' relevance theory (2016), which is based on incongruity-resolution theories. These theories propose that, with humorous discourse, the receiver is able to identify a way of thinking that allows them to reconcile the incongruity (partially), by reinterpreting (aspects of the) discourse. Yus uses pragmatic insights on relevance to describe why the second interpretation is discovered after the incongruity is experienced and why the resolution is pleasurable. His theory claims that receivers do not like to encounter incongruities (Yus 2016: 87-88) and

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<sup>6</sup> See Dynel 2009 for a thorough discussion on 'on-line' processing and on the idea of 'backtracking' that somewhat nuances the claim of linearity.



presupposes predominantly linear processing, in which the linear movement is interrupted by a dynamic of backtracking and of re-examining previous elements (66). The recent cognitive linguistic theories, such as the ones discussed by Brône, Feyaerts and Veale (Brône & Feyaerts 2004; Brône et al. 2006; Brône 2017), would make the problem less noticeable but do not solve it. Essentially, they do not explicitly presuppose a predominantly linear, 'uncomplicated' reading process but the central idea that the high level of semantic creativity needed to perform the atypical usages of construal operations leads to a sudden feeling of incongruity makes little sense for any reading process where a high level of creativity is already expected.

A recent study which, like this article, problematizes the idea of a linear reading process for humour is *On the Discourse of Satire* (2003) by Paul Simpson. Simpson's analytic model for satirical humour implies a reading process that leading up to the moment of incongruity entails the recognition of two discursive 'elements' (the 'prime' and the 'dialectic'<sup>7</sup>) and is predominantly linear. After the moment of incongruity however, a third, non-linear phase of interpretation (the 'uptake'<sup>8</sup>) takes place (Simpson

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<sup>7</sup> The distinction is similar to that between thesis and antithesis and involves different types of irony (echoic vs. oppositional) being used.

<sup>8</sup> After the interpretation of the prime and the dialectic, readers realise that an implicit claim of sincerity has been rescinded. Consequently, they reconsider whether the text claims to be truthful and appropriate. This process of reconsideration corresponds to a third type of irony, the irony of 'conferral'.

2003: 88-90). The tripartite structure of Simpson's model may invite comparison with the model that I will introduce shortly. The structural similarity is however superficial. What Simpson's model and mine do have in common is the idea that, in certain text types (namely satire and poetry respectively), a linear, joke-like reading takes place but is followed by one or more non-linear dynamics of interpretation. Our models describe different dynamics of that type and could theoretically be combined.

### Three flows of reading

To solve the issue, I propose a reading consisting of three flows of reading, based on insights from the SSTH/GTVH, particularly on the idea that humour is, at least partly, caused by a disjunction on the level of the scripts used to interpret textual elements. A first flow, the 'decoding flow', is relatively simple and linear. Readers spontaneously decode the signs and thereby experience the disjunction and its direct effects. In the second, 'poetic', flow they have already experienced the effect of the disjunction, whereby they focus on the elements and relations of the opposition. They interpret these as serious elements of the poem. The fact that readers ultimately experience only one relatively coherent reading may indicate a third, 'meta-reflective' flow which unites interpretations from the other two flows into one rich, coherent reading.

Note that the flows of reading do not have to occur in a strictly successive manner. Since the first flow causes the second, for any given short joke within the larger poem, the poetic flow can only start after the first one has started. This does not mean however that the first flow has to be over. Readers may very well read the joke in a quick and predominantly linear way, start rereading it, interpreting the opposition in a poetic way, then reread the joke in the simpler way, then continue the poetic reading. Similarly, for any given short joke, the third flow can only start after the decoding and the poetic flow have both started, because the meta-reflective flow aims to unite the previous ones. This does not mean that readers cannot repeat or continue the decoding and/or poetic flow once they have started the unifying flow. Furthermore, I write 'for any given short joke' because my model in no way implies that readers conduct a decoding, then a poetic and finally a unifying flow of reading for the text as a whole.

#### *The decoding flow*

How does the decoding flow work in concrete terms? The first stanza activates the 'duty' script. It brings up part of the prototypical situation in question, namely the possibility that the conscientious actor may have to perform the acts that are their duty against their will: 'MY duties he remarked with tears, / I've never sought to shun-; / Yet hard it is that at my years / They have again begun.' The first two verses of the second stanza read: 'No one believed in me, or cared / If I kept my vigils'. They correspond to a first moment of

disjunction. Readers have to switch to the traditional ghost script to understand why no one believes in the 'I'-speaker. The third and fourth verse also each contain a moment of disjunction. Since ghosts pay little attention to the public, the script of 'sense of duty' is once again necessary to interpret the third verse, 'My diligence the public spared'. Finally, to understand the metaphor of death as undisturbed sleep in the fourth verse, 'And undisturbed I slept[.],' readers must tap into both scripts.

The third script, that of the parapsychological 'ghost apparition', is evoked in the third stanza. Until then, the lexemes surrounding ghosts were read with the traditional script. The concept of 'Psychical Societies' could be a creative addition to that script, but when those associations are presented as attackers of an innocent ghost, it becomes clear that the traditional ghost script must be abandoned in exchange for the script that is evoked by the term itself. The fact that 'Psychical Societies' is written in italics furthermore clarifies that readers must make a mental effort to interpret that term. They have to activate another script. Note how the script is called at the beginning of a metaphor that, like the metaphor at the end of the second, contains a disjunction. It says 'These *Psychical Societies* / Descending upon me.' The implicit comparison is that the way associations attack the ghost is as terrifying or aggressive as the way evil spirits descend on their victims. This illustrates how a serious poetic device such as the metaphor can be combined with a humorous disjunction. During the decoding flow, readers also recognize similar disjunctions in the continuation of the poem: a disjunction from the psychical

script ('they wonder what I mean by not') to the traditional ghost script ('steering my phantom boat'); then a switch to the worker script ('They would not think it such a joke to [activity]', as if complaining of unequal quantities of labour) followed by a switch back to the traditional ghost script ('To rattle fetters'), next a switch back to the worker script ('As Duty bids me do') etc. In short, the text constantly switches from one script to another, causing readers to process the contrasts between his mental representation of that which the text describes based on the first script and his representation based on the second script. The first funny aspects of Kendall's text are therefore how unthreatening and mundane hauntings look when the ghosts are presented as old workers doing their jobs, how horrible and abnormal the idea of having to keep working indefinitely is when it is presented as a kind of rest-deprivation with which ghosts are cursed, how unthreatening the psychical idea of a ghost looks when presented as a spectre that does not scare humans away but is studied by them and how threatening the psychical societies seem when presented as humans haunting ghosts.

### *The poetic flow*

During the poetic flow, the humorous elements are interpreted in a poetic reading process. For the sake of clarity, it is important to address what I mean by 'poetic reading process' before describing a particular reading process for 'The Conscientious Ghost'. Neurocognitive literature studies describe reading processes as processes in which readers

make imperfect predictions about what will come next and experience emotions because of the predictions. Characteristic of literary texts, according to Karin Kukkonen, is that they acquire coherence through a system or 'design' that the author introduces in the evolution of readers' expectations during the reading (Kukkonen 2020: 1-10). How does that work in poetry?

Poetry is characterized, among other things, by a dominance of the poetic function described by Roman Jakobson (1960: 350-377). Language in its poetic function focuses on the message itself. 'Message' refers to the encoded message. While Jakobson explains this in a more structuralist way, from a cognitive perspective, the poetic function can be conceptualized as something which *readers* experience as the function of the text when they (the readers) focus primarily on the encoded message rather than on the reality being presented. How and why does that happen? What makes readers focus more on the referential reality in some cases and more on the encoded message in others? The reworked version of Jakobson's communication model by Julia Kerbrat-Orecchioni suggests that as to read a text, readers have to use different categories of knowledge, including encyclopaedic, linguistic and stylistic knowledge (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997: 34-40). Since readers use knowledge to make predictions about what they will read next, it would make sense if they focused on encyclopaedic knowledge (either knowledge stored in their mental encyclopaedia or world knowledge presented by the text) when they want to predict what they will read next about the reality to which the text is referring. It

would also make sense if they used knowledge on linguistic and stylistic rules and conventions (either belonging to their knowledge on language or style or inherent to the stylistic properties of the text at hand) when they are trying to predict how the text will follow certain principles of that kind. In the latter case, they would, as a result, focus on the encoded message, from where they gain knowledge about the rules and conventions that characterize the style of the text. The poetic function is then most precisely defined not by the reader's focus on the encoded message itself but on the stylistic and linguistic knowledge used in the processes of encoding and decoding.<sup>9</sup> The poetic function in a poem can then occur in the following way: when reading poems, a reader wants the text to provide appropriate words and structures for a concept or feeling that is difficult to articulate, as that would produce a cathartic or satisfying effect. Among other things, a reader makes estimates about the strategies by which the text wants to achieve its emotionally marked effect and does so by focusing on the 'rules' of the processes that the text uses strategically.

How now does the poetic function work in 'The Conscientious Ghost'? Kendall's poem works as a lament that explores the emotionally marked theme of 'lacking rest'.

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<sup>9</sup> Note, that I am not referring to knowledge about any code that exists in the world and to which the message refers. The focus on that kind of knowledge characterizes the metalinguistic function.

'Lacking rest' is a rather abstract and broad theme to explore in an emotionally satisfying way through text. Readers 'estimate' how the poem will bring that about anyhow based on the stylistic principles they see the text follow. The term 'estimate' here refers to 'predictive' processing in the neurocognitive sense of the term, which means that the mind is using predictions based on knowledge from past experiences and perceived patterns to complete its representation of what the complete text will be like. Readers at no point have to make a conscious effort to predict the rest of the poem. They notice how the text introduces many *topoi*<sup>10</sup> from ghost stories, such as the nocturnal wandering, the ringing of rusty bells, or the gloomy air that may symbolize the lack of moments of rest, repetitive forms of work and a lack of dreams or prospects. Subtle instances of sound play, such as that with s-sounds in 'these psychological societies descending upon me', can through iconicity, express a disturbance of silence. Like other descriptions of sounds such as the ringing of bells and the clanging of chains, it symbolizes a disturbance of the

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<sup>10</sup> I consider these *topoi* as stylistic principles since their use seems entirely based on the symbolic conventions through which gothic literature expresses its conventional themes, not on the logic of the (fictional) world. Why would Kendall's ghost own a boat and fight on 'blood-stained floors'?



peace. The poem thus seems to want to explore a lack of rest <sup>11</sup>allegorically with these connected symbols. The allegory here is a sustained metaphor comparing the life of a rest-deprived worker to that of a rest-deprived ghost.

However, the 'design' of the text makes it such that readers only understand how this reflection works as a whole at the end of the reading process. The humorous oppositions as aspects of the semantic structure play a central role in this. They make it difficult to predict before the end of the reading how the text will use its symbolism to arrive at a coherent allegory. How can the lack of rest of a common, living, dutiful worker serve as a metaphor for and thus be compared to that of an abnormal and dead ghost or vice versa? And then again, what type of ghost is it, one that haunts mortals or one that is haunted by parapsychological societies?

How *does* the structure ultimately lead to a coherent allegorical meaning? 'The Conscientious Ghost' is structured as follows. In the first six stanzas, the ghost complains about its duties. In the next three, he consoles himself with the thought that the ghosts will punish the person responsible for the existence of the psychical societies with even more severe ghost work after his death. In the tenth stanza he suddenly pauses, rearranges his fetters and sheet, and concludes in a whisper: 'In this world of change / One can't be

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the idea of a lack of rest is part of the 'duty' script. As such it is also involved in the incongruities of the decoding flow.

too complete!' This moment seems to mark an abrupt shift in the attitude and emotions of the ghost. They go from victorious to woeful (and thus non-victorious). The need for his 'uniform' to be worn correctly seems to symbolize his obligation to be a perfect, dutiful labourer. This was of course the fate which he was enthusiastically planning to bestow upon his enemies in the previous stanzas. The emotional-attitudinal shift from victorious to woeful therefore seems to be caused by the realisation that he can only punish the societies with a fate nearly identical to his own. The connection between this realisation and the shift from victorious to non-victorious may hold the key to an interpretation of the entire allegory. The first six and the following three stanzas can be seen as phases in a conflict between the old ghost, who longs for the classical situation of ghosts, and the parapsychological associations, which bring about a new, labour-intensive situation. The final reference to the world as 'this world of change' emphasizes that conflict.

However, the two 'stages' in the text are strikingly similar. In both phases, the poem presents a series of tasks that a ghost must perform. This may symbolize how the lack of rest is not merely a result of one group imposing its will on another but is a result of a changing *Zeitgeist* that affects everyone's life. Just as it is of no use for the old spectre to teach the parapsychological associations a lesson, it is of no use for the conscientious Victorian to get angry at the society that does not allow him to rest. The incessant flow of duties remains in any case and for all parties involved.

The humorous oppositions can also be interpreted symbolically based on this idea of changing times with changing frames of thought. The incompatible 'ghost' scripts indicate that two historically marked frames of thought are evoked. The 'good-bad' opposition in particular can symbolise how societal evolutions can turn our value systems upside-down, making a 'good' principle (such as value) threatening, as it may lead to lives without time to rest or, symbolically speaking, making a ghost a victim instead of a threat.

The incompatibility between the characterizations of the ghost as an abnormal, ageless apparition of a dead person on the one hand and as the average workman leading his 'life' and ageing like any other human on the other underscores how our idea of normality varies according to the frame of mind we employ and how the changing *Zeitgeist* is ultimately inescapable yet unpredictable. Symbolically speaking, even those in the eternal realm of the dead have to face it yet it turns even the fact that ageing will change our activities into something uncertain. The central strategy that determines the poem's coherence then consists in the exploration of the increasing lack of rest as a result of a change of frame of mind (*Zeitgeist*) via the allegory comparing the life of a worker to the existence of a spectre who, because of a changing view on the afterlife, is not allowed to rest. In vain, the ghost therefore tries to oppose the changing *Zeitgeist*.

*The meta-reflective flow*

In the third flow, readers try to unite the first two flows. Since we are usually not fully aware of the cognitive mechanisms behind experiences of (joke-like) humour, they may usually not experience the first flow very consciously. They are most likely to notice the evocation of the scripts, their oppositions and the fact that laughter is generated. The poetic flow requires reflection and is therefore more conscious, but it does not provoke strong laughter because there are no neat disjunctions and readers are focussing on the strategies foregrounded in the poetic function. After all, readers do not switch abruptly from one script to another. They consider them simultaneously and try to predict how the text will connect them symbolically.

In the meta-reflective flow readers therefore try to see the presentation of the complex whole of knowledge about classical ghosts, psychological research, a sense of duty, but also the changing spirit of the times and the changing images of people and science from the poetic flow as laughable. In other words, they have to combine and rearrange the evoked knowledge into a structure of extra scripts which oppose each other in a potentially humorous way and together encompass *all* knowledge evoked in the first two flows. I borrow the idea that a literary reader can restructure cognitive structures under the influence of a text from Peter Stockwell (2005: 79). I write 'extra' because their creation does not 'destroy' the other scripts. Readers who interpret all the events of the poem (as signs of the old or new *Zeitgeist* (see below)), by using the scripts from the all-encompassing script opposition, still use the ghost scripts and the duty script as well. The

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meta-reflective flow simply adds the two scripts of the all-encompassing opposition and reads their opposition as humorous.

An obvious opposition according to which knowledge can be classified is the contradiction between the old ways of thinking (the gothic view on ghosts and the idea that rest is important) and the new way of thinking (the parapsychological view on ghosts and the idea that you can never be too dutiful), which is central to the strategic structure of the poem. To make them humorous, readers can mentally link them to a 'good-bad' or a 'normal-abnormal' opposition. They no longer see the play with the ghost scripts and the sense of duty script as the laughable aspect of the text, but rather the contrast between the bad, strange, new way of thinking of the rest-deprived Victorian and the parapsychological scientist on the one hand, and the better or more normal, traditional way of thinking about duty, age and ghosts on the other.

Interesting parallels can be noted between these "extra" scripts created in the meta-reflective flow and the concept of "superscript" introduced by Isabel Ermida (2008)<sup>12</sup>. Both superscripts and "meta-reflective flow (MRF) scripts" are relatively

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<sup>12</sup> According to Ermida's theory on humour in narratives the scripts that are activated in the processing of a comic narrative form a hierarchy in the sense that "infrascripts", activated during the processing of shorter sequences of text, repeatedly evoke "superscripts", which are used to interpret longer sequences of text or even the entire narrative. The concept stored in the superscript can be seen as a hyperonym of the concepts stored in the infrascripts that evoke it. The hierarchy can be multi-layered. Near

abstract scripts that are related to several more concrete scripts used to interpret shorter sequences of text. Also, while the idea of an incongruity on the level of suprascripts explains how the humour in a narrative is more than the sum of its short simple jokes, the idea of an incongruity between MRF scripts plays a role in my explanation on why this is the case in humorous poetry. Nevertheless, suprascripts and MRF scripts should not be seen as equivalent concepts from different theories or for different types of texts. Suprascripts exist as part of our semantic knowledge and are evoked during the predominantly linear, everyday reading process, while MRF scripts are by definition only formed as part of a typically poetic reading process<sup>13</sup>.

Note that the formation of the two very abstract scripts takes a lot of cognitive effort and that the union of the first flows may therefore also be imperfect. As a result, a tension can arise in which readers are not quite sure why they are laughing at what they

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the end of the narrative, the reader has to switch from the use of a suprascript on the highest level of the hierarchy to an opposite suprascript (its “shadowscript”). This script switch on the level of the entire narrative causes the text to be humorous as a whole (Ermida 2008: 172-173).

<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, there seems to be no reason as to why they could not both be used during the interpretation of the same text. Such a text would have to possess both a narrative structure (or at least a central theme that gets evoked by different motives) and a poetic quality which makes readers look for multiple, complex meanings. Further research would be necessary to determine if and how these types of scripts would then interact.

perceive as serious content in the poetic flow. In Kendall's poem, that feeling of hesitation can be reinforced by the fact that the emotional state of the lyrical subject, with whom readers might identify, remains unclear. While the ghost tells of its suffering with much pathos, readers at no time learn how the lyrical 'I' responds. Do they experience a feeling of pity towards the ghost, are they afraid of the spectre, do they experience existential dread at the thought that his own ghost will never find eternal rest, or do they find the entire situation funny, as they are still alive and well? By the end of the poem, readers know only that the lyrical subject sometimes thinks they hear the ghost long after the conversation, which may indicate a subtle uneasiness.

Also note that the funniness of the disjunction in the meta-reflective flow does not 'compete' with the funniness experienced in the decoding flow but rather recontextualizes it, giving it a place in a coherent reading of the text as a poem. The mundanity of the hauntings, the horror related to labour, the scariness of the psychical societies and the victimhood of the ghost are still funny but the experience that they are funny is now connected to the larger experience of ridiculous contrasts between the old and the new *Zeitgeist*.

We may conclude that the three-flow model allows the analyst to demonstrate the rich significance which a reader can attach to Kendall's humour. It reveals how the mechanisms behind humour play an important role in the poetic creation of complex

meaning. The model could moreover easily be applied to works by other poets or to other non-poetic texts that can be read in a similar, non-linear way. Still, it in no way solves every difficulty concerning the application of models for verbal humour to poetry. For example, I did not investigate how the prosodic and rhetorical properties of a poem can play a role in readers' experiences of humour. In that sense, it would be useful to expand the model in future research.



THE CONSCIENTIOUS GHOST

(Psychical.)

'MY duties he remarked with tears,

I've never sought to shun;

Yet hard it is that at my years

They have again begun.

'No one believed in me, or cared

If I my vigils kept;

My diligence the public spared,

And undisturbed I slept.

'Yet now I never close my eyes

But in my dreams I see

These Psychical Societies

Descending upon me.

'They ask me whether I forgot

To wander round the moat;

They wonder what I mean by not  
Steering my phantom boat.

*They* would not think it such a joke  
To rattle fetters through  
The weary night till morning broke,  
As Duty bids me do!

'Alas,' he groaned, 'on blood-stained floors  
Again to fight and fall!  
To shiver round the secret doors,  
The draughty banquet hall.

'I say it was a heartless thought –  
Wherever he may dwell  
Who on us this disaster brought,  
I'd like to haunt him well.

'And ah!' he cried, with rapture grim,  
'One thing consoles me most:

We'll make it very warm for him

When once he is a ghost!

'When every honest phantom sleeps

He'll have to freeze in cells,

And wring his hands by mouldy keeps,

And jangle rusty bells.'

He paused, his fetters to arrange,

Adjust his winding-sheet;

He murmured, 'In this world of change

One can't be too complete!'

He fixed on me a glance of woe,

Then vanished into air;

I heard his clanking fetter go

Right down the winding stair.

Yet sometimes, when 'mid wind and rain

I'm lying warm and dry,

I seem to hear him clank his chain

Beneath the dismal sky.

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